

TRANSHUMANISM AND EPISTEMOLOGY

by **Riccardo Campa**

Abstract:

This article is a fragment of the Italian Transhumanist Manifesto. The author analyzes the main epistemological orientations characterizing the transhumanist movement, by referring to the results of a recent internal survey. He argues that these data imply a sub-optimal communication between the transhumanist movement and the external world, since its utopian reputation is in contrast with the pragmatic approach to science of most transhumanists. Finally, by shifting from a descriptive perspective to a normative one, he proposes “critical scientism” as an acceptable compromise among the different philosophical souls of the movement and, especially, between scientism and postmodernism.

The main idea behind transhumanism can be summarized in a single sentence: it is possible and desirable to switch from blind evolution to self-directed, self-conscious evolution. We are ready to do what science makes possible today, namely to take our destiny in our hands. We are ready to accept the challenges arising from the world of biotechnology, cognitive sciences, robotics, nanotechnology, AI, and to take these challenges to a political and philosophical level to give a sense and a direction to our path.

It should be noted that this project does not have much to do with the negative and repressive forms of eugenics preached in the 19th century and implemented in the United States, in the Third Reich and social-democratic Scandinavia in the first half of the 20th century. Sterilization of individuals with inheritable diseases is a primitive and brutal response to a problem new technologies allow us to overcome without affecting individual reproductive freedom. In other words, it is grossly mystifying to identify the negative and authoritarian eugenics of the past with the contemporary transhumanist model of self-directed evolution, which is aimed at positively ensuring the health and the enhancement of individuals and of their offspring while protecting the freedom of choice and the health of our descendants.

Even though it is possible to deal with these problem for the first time in those terms today, it would be equally wrong to see the overcoming of current human limitations as a plan dreamed up by improvised apprentice sorcerers. Such idea has on the contrary a solid tradition in the history of European thought, and is suggested or reflected in the works of thinkers of the caliber of Francis Bacon, Tommaso Campanella, Jean Condorcet, Friedrich Nietzsche, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Leon Trotsky, Julian Huxley, Jacques Monod, Francis Crick and Jean-François Lyotard, just to mention a few of the best-known amongst them. Now, we are simply bringing forward their discourse.

As it can easily be seen from our Pantheon, the central transhumanist idea can be coupled with different political, epistemological and religious opinions. Accordingly, we have observed

individuals and groups joining us from very different persuasions. On one hand such diversity may be an asset in terms of ideas and stimuli, but on the other hand it may involve a practical paralysis, especially when members give priority to their existing affiliations over their belonging to organized transhumanism. In order to remedy this inconvenience we have engaged for years in a debate aimed at finding a positive synthesis of different transhumanist tendencies and philosophical propensities.

Concerning epistemology – or, more modestly, the image of science – we have two main propensities. On one side, we have transhumanists careful to remain within the boundaries of official and academic science, and accordingly inclined to consider science fiction, utopias and futurism little more than a pastime or useful thought experiments. On the other, there are transhumanists ready to consider possible technologies and events yet to take place as articles of faith, only because they have been predicted by some eminent futurists or science fiction novelists. Those differences concern mostly subjects such as mind-uploading, immortality, the coming of a Singularity. It appears here that 19% of World Transhumanist Association (WTA) members deem its discourse too oriented in a utopian, futurist and science-fictional direction, while 8% believes on the contrary that the WTA is too focused on short-term, uninspirational, prosaic issues. The remaining 73% believe instead that the existing WTA approach is sufficiently balanced in this respect. Now, this does not tell much, until one considers how respondents interpret the WTA line. It is therefore more significant to observe that only 7% proclaim themselves “immortalist”, that is believers in an earthly immortality. The remaining 93% confine themselves to a much more pragmatic and realistic stance, defining transhumanism under this aspect in terms of longevism, extension of the human lifespan and life expectancy within the limit of the opportunities increasingly offered by biological and physical sciences.

The data are significant, because they imply a sub-optimal communication between the transhumanist movement and the external world. Many people who come in contact with transhumanist ideas derive as a consequence a wrong impression, an idea often very remote from what real transhumanism actually is. This is true for the US movement, but even more for European transhumanism.

Often, this wrong impression produces an accusation of quackery. According to these critics, transhumanists, rather than referring to official, mainstream science, prefer to believe in utopian, futurist, science-fiction fairy tales. The abolition of death can only be believed by taking liberties with both the natural sciences and social sciences. A serious analysis must in fact take into account all the available information and data, including feedbacks and built-in limitations, and not just extrapolate trends from a few discoveries and inventions according to what would conform best with one's desires and hopes. But, these critics maintain, transhumanists are either naive or charlatans. They equally ignore science and philosophy. Thus, from the fact that the implanted Braingate chip allows electric signals to transfer from the brain to a machine, (transhumanists supposedly) hasten to conclude that all individuals will be soon uploaded on a digital computer, thus resolving forever the problem of death. From the fact that the processing power of computers doubles every eighteen months, according to Moore's Law, (all transhumanists supposedly) infer that some kind of Singularity is not only possible, but certain and very imminent.

Now, needless to say, there appears a rather sharp contrast between the poll results reported above and these accusations. Even though the latter voices are not predominant, they are

nevertheless very vociferous. Thus, a resolute and clear response (both in descriptive and normative terms) is required to clear away negative stereotypes.

Transhumanists adhere to different epistemological doctrines. Amongst us, one can find critical empiricists and rationalists, neopositivists and pragmatists, inductivists and deductivists, realists and relativists, modernists and postmodernists. But whatever the image of science that our members espouse, they all share a confidence in science - in the broadest sense of the word, as the form of knowledge that is based on logic and experimental evidence.

There are those who see science as a value per se as well as those who consider it as a tool, those who are enthused by its cognitive potential and those who define it by its ability to create technologies. But there are no science enemies or deniers among the transhumanists. And when we say “science” we do not refer to any pseudosciences, but mean to official, established, mainstream science accepted by the academia and the international scientific community through peer-reviewed work and general consent, even though we would hardly deny that there are distortions, endemic conservatism, and cronyism that may affect the scientific process and unduly slow down or resist the success of new theoretical, methodological or technical breakthroughs and changes of paradigm, especially in the academia.

The synthesis of all our philosophical and epistemological positions is found therefore in a *scientific worldview*.

If this is the case - and considering that the leading and most influential transhumanists work in the best universities and research centers of the world, humanities departments included - one cannot but be astonished by the charge of quackery that is often raised against transhumanism. In our view, this problem arises from the fact that transhumanist intellectuals have often been involved in sketching futurist scenarios and in the tentative extrapolation of current trends. This activity is perfectly legitimate, but the undesirable side effect has been that mass media tends to focus on the most curious or sensational aspects of such speculations, rather than the serious research projects that denote the everyday work of many transhumanists.

This is why it is urgent to make explicit that for us the border between science and science fiction is extremely well-defined. Scientific theories are one thing, and futurist speculations or engineering thought experiments are another. Those two areas have different purposes. Technoscientific research is aimed at elaborating, enriching and deepening our knowledge and power in the world, while futurist speculations - which cannot be considered as science, since they make non-verifiable, albeit more or less plausible, hypotheses on possible future events - is rather concerned with the mental exploration of different future developments of the present circumstances and of other, sometimes unexpected, factors, without any certainty or faith in things that are “bound to happen”.

While transhumanists are perfectly clear on the hypothetical and speculative nature of futurist scenarios, misunderstandings continue to arise. A new communication strategy should be adopted in which transhumanists avoid mixing up of far-fetched speculations with the official transhumanist discourse. With this choice we do nothing other than give due prominence to what are majority views throughout the international transhumanist movement.

Let us consider the controversial issue of longevism and immortalism. From the WTA poll it appears, as already noted, that a mere 7% of WTA members believe in the possibility of an earthly immortality, while 93% believes in the more sober and immediate prospective of a radical

extension of our life expectancy (a trend that is undeniably already in place) and of our species' lifespan.

Now, as a first concrete stance, I and other transhumanists have decided to drastically limit the rhetoric connected with the use of the word "immortality." We do not promise immortality, nor do we indicate it as an item in our agenda. It is too far away from immediate possibilities offered or envisaged by mainstream science. Besides, even after an indefinite extension of our life span, many possible causes of death would remain, from a car accident to the exhaustion of our sun's nuclear fuel. Were humans or posthumans to quit the planet before its doom, there are obviously no certainties that every single individual may survive, let alone be resurrected from the dead, or that it would be possible in this universe to eternally process the information defining individual identity. Let us leave to the theologians and novelists concepts such as the conversion of all matter in the universe into a single thinking and divine being.

If we really should venture into futurist speculations, a more plausible scenario would be the one sketched in François Lyotard's *Moralités postmodernes*, in which our successors are compelled to relocate in order to survive the death of the planet Earth, a space caravan of cyborgs and mutants rather than a godlike supercomputer that contains all conceivable knowledge and expands triumphally out to the borders of our galaxy. While stronger and more intelligent than existing human beings, the sentient beings of the future will inevitably remain weaker than natural forces - which makes their challenge to nature only more interesting and worthy of living.

In summary, only when a technology exists and is experimentally proved should it become part of immediate transhumanist policies and action programs aimed at obtaining their implementation and broad accessibility. Until then, it can only be a working hypothesis for scientists in their laboratories or of science fiction writers in their literary works. Transhumanists are ready to recognize the importance of those speculations because they help to give sense and a direction to their action and offer a long-term vision allowing us to frame contemporary problems in a broader, more "cosmic" prospective. But we cannot base present policies on hypotheses that for the time being are only theoretically feasible, such as mind-uploading or an artificial-intelligence Singularity.

Such speculations risk making transhumanism a new "opium of the masses." We do not want transhumanists to ignore the struggle for access to real or present technologies, such as IVF, cloning, cybernetic prosthetics, artificial organs, ubiquitous broadband, nanobots, genetically modified organisms, new sources of energy, etc., distracted by a promise of salvation or rapture by a future possible Computer-God, or the final defeat of scarcity thanks to the coming of the Universal Nanomolecular Assembler. Nor do we want such speculation to distract from the social, political, national, and economic context of emerging technologies, the "when, where, why, who" of future developments, which make all the difference for real peoples.

We are not deluded that, by making those strategic guidelines public, the attacks against transhumanism will eventually cease. We expect on the contrary that they will take new forms, equally based on biases and falsehoods. But this is not a source of concern for us as it is part of the dynamics of the political and cultural debate. By acknowledging that we do not want to indulge in self-victimization, a stance hardly compatible with our fierce and joyful attitude, but simply to allow ourselves a touch of irony. Having defended the cognitive possibilities of science and the usefulness of its applications, we shall now be accused of naive scientism.

“Scientism” has become a swearword, almost an insult. In general, “scientism” is ritually followed by some reference to the 19th century to imply that it is a useless out-of-fashion concept. Unfortunately those who want to relegate this term to the historical dustbin usually do so in the name of much older and more stale ideas, such as creationism or the Christian dogmas. If an idea is to be disposed of because it was born in the 19th century what should we do with ideas that became widespread in Europe in the 4th century? Besides, while monotheistic religions, being based on one “Revelation” or another, cannot change, secular philosophies evolve and adapt to times, to new knowledges, to new feelings.

Scientific worldviews have also evolved. Scientism used to be “naive”, assuming that science could reveal a final truth about the world instead of continually evolving. Naive scientism thought that science was the sole acceptable source of knowledge and that scientific methods had to be applied to all aspects of reality. But now scientism has become *critical*. “Critical scientism” acknowledges several diverse forms of knowledge, but maintains that science is a legitimate and even preferred form of knowledge, and it is therefore possible, although not compulsory, to apply scientific methods to all aspects of reality.

Such an approach respects philosophical insights, since - contrary to 19th century scientism - its supporters are aware that the scientific worldview itself is a philosophy, is part of philosophy. In other words, science has profited from postmodern and critical studies. With anti-science postmodernism the debate may have been fierce, but it was precisely those “science wars” that allowed science to refine this position. As an army after the battle may incorporate the weapons and insignia of the enemy, many of those who nowadays give great importance to scientific worldviews do not hesitate to qualify themselves as well in a critical and postmodern fashion. If the uncritical scientist of the 19th century was persuaded that we can know everything, and the skeptical scientist of the 20th century was inclined to believe that nothing could be really known after all, the new critical position simply maintains that there are things which we can know with sufficient probability and for all practical purposes.

While this may reflect a synthesis in the meta-science field, we aren’t trying to assert that this is necessarily the “transhumanist” position. On the contrary, it is our intention to let everybody define themselves as they see fit. This epistemological stand should be understood as a proposal.

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